



71: Kinda Like a Promise by cali-chan

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Summary: "Like a secret?" "Yeah, but a good one. Like... it means more because it's just between the two of us. It's special." January 1985 brings holiday-break afternoons at the Hoppers'. Mike/Eleven, post-S2. (Spoilers!)

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Kinda Like a Promise. PG-13, Mike/Eleven, post-S2. (Spoilers!)

"Like a secret?" "Yeah, but a good one. Like... it means more because it's just between the two of us. It's special." January 1985 brings holiday-break afternoons at the Hoppers'.

Guys, these things just keep getting schmoopier and schmoopier the more of them I write, SEND HELP. D:

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El learned what "Christmas break" was when Hopper came home from work one night grumbling about annoying kids ambushing him at his office.

Since the day she closed the gate and revealed herself to her friends, she didn't feel alone and bored anymore. She still couldn't go out of the cabin (except for the night of the Snow Ball, thankfully), but her friends came over to visit her almost every day after school— mostly Mike, but the others made an effort to come around at least once a week— which made her really happy.

They couldn't come all at once because Hopper thought it was more risky, but they visited one at a time, usually accompanied by Nancy, Jonathan, or even Steve once or twice, to make sure there was always a grown-up around. Joyce would also visit sometimes after work, or during weekends. El liked when Joyce came over, because they'd eat something other than frozen food, and also because Hopper always seemed really happy when she was around.

(Will told her once, chuckling, that Lucas liked to call their visiting schedule "El duty," which Mike always got mad at him about because "hanging out with El is not a chore!" El still had trouble understanding that figure of speech. She knew what "chore" meant, but she didn't know what sweeping the floor and cleaning the toilets had anything to do with their visits).

(Sometimes being able to move things with her mind came in really handy).

Even Max had started coming by. Not initially, because El didn't like her very much at first, but once Mike had explained that he and Max were just friends, she was open to getting to know her a little bit better. She did help her boys out that day, after all, and El was curious as to what it would be like to have a friend her age who was a girl.

She and Mike had agreed to apologize to Max together, so one day at school, Mike gave Max the directions to the cabin and they agreed to meet on the way the next day after school.

Max, of course, decided to just visit on her own that very same afternoon. And El had to apologize by herself.

"Okay, sure, I forgive you," Max was quick to concede. El was glad to see she wasn't that angry— she'd been very rude to her, after all. Then the redhead frowned a little, like she was confused. "But why were you even mad at me?"

El was silent for a few seconds, trying to think of how to put it in words. What was it that Mike had called it— *jealous*? "I thought you liked Mike," she finally settled on. "Like *that*," she added, just in case "like" wasn't clear enough. She'd come to learn that verbs such as "like" and "love" had many different meanings, depending on what you were talking about. For example, she loved Eggos, but she also liked Mike better than Eggos. It could get a bit confusing.

Max stared at her for a moment, and then abruptly broke into laughter. El was startled, and unsure if she should take that as a good reaction, or as a bad one. "Come on, seriously?" the skater girl managed between guffaws. It went on like that for almost a minute. "Why would I ever like Mike?" she asked when the laughter wound down and she could finally catch her breath. "I mean, have you seen his hair?"

El frowned. She didn't know what that meant. "...What's wrong with his hair?" El liked Mike's hair. It was a very pretty shade of black, and it was soft. Sometimes when it was raining outside it got a bit curlier,

and it made her want to run her hands through it.

Max laughed again, shaking her head like Hopper did when he said El was being "unbelievable." Which happened often. "Oh God, you're as far gone as he is. No wonder you wanted to kill me for just standing next to him!" the other girl quipped with a chuckle. "Listen, as long as you don't tell anyone you knocked me off my skateboard, we're good. I got a reputation to uphold, here."

"Mike knows," El pointed out, a little worried that it would make Max angry. She hoped it wasn't— what was it that Hopper called it?— a *dealbreaker*.

Fortunately, Max seemed to wave it off without much concern. "Hah! Mr. Paladin doesn't count; he was there. But with anyone else, just keep that part secret. Okay?"

"Secret?" El had heard that word before, but wasn't entirely sure what it meant. Sometimes it sounded a little too much like lying, and friends don't lie.

"Yeah, like something you don't tell other people because it's embarrassing," the redhead explained, and El liked that she didn't talk down to her like she was stupid. "Deal?"

El thought about it. Maybe this "secret" thing was not so bad; by not saying anything, she didn't hurt Max, but she also didn't have to tell her other friends something that wasn't true. It seemed like a good compromise, so she nodded. "Deal."

"Cool. So, friends?" Max gave her a smile.

El smiled back. "Friends." She was expecting the girl to extend her hand for a shake (she'd learned that one from the TV), but was surprised when Max instead moved forward to hug her, her long, red hair flying behind her as she did so. El hugged her back lightly, deciding she was okay with it— she liked hugs, hugs were nice— and Max squeezed her shoulders a little tighter for a second.

When she pulled back, she was grinning brightly. "This is gonna be great. You're gonna help me play so many pranks on these idiots!"

"...Pranks?"

Mike did eventually apologize to Max as well, but he did it at school, so El wasn't there to see it. It did mean that Max was added to the "El duty" schedule, though, and the girl had been visiting regularly. She'd take the bus to the closest stop to the cabin, and skate from there. Or, when it got too icy for her to skate, she'd just walk. She didn't mind. She liked it better at the cabin than at her house.

(Funny, Hopper didn't seem to mind that there wasn't a grown-up around for *those* visits).

About a week before Christmas, however, Max and the boys decided to change things up a bit. Their holiday break was coming up, and they'd have no classes for two weeks, so they wanted to hang out with El all together at least once. Mike was writing a D&D adventure, and Dustin had been collecting snacks for weeks, and all they needed was Hopper's permission and they'd be ready to go.

So they invaded the Police Station one day after school, insisting on sticking around even though Flo, the secretary at the Police station (who Eleven had never met, but liked very much just from Hop's stories), told them the Chief was very busy and shouldn't be bothered with kids' stuff.

It turned out that while Will and Dustin "charmed the pants off" of Flo (El had asked what that meant but Hopper only said they were being really, really nice to her and then refused to explain what that had to do with pants), Mike, Lucas and Max had snuck into the Chief's office to plead their case, much to Hopper's annoyance. Apparently Mike had come prepared with a long list of reasons why their idea was a good one, and wasn't backing down even when confronted with Hopper's most threatening glare, and eventually Hopper relented just so they'd go away.

He *had* insisted, however, that they wait until after New Year's Day, just to make things easier for their parents. El didn't mind; she'd decided she liked the holidays. Now that Hopper was officially her new father (although "Dad" still sounded a little foreign to her and she couldn't bring herself to call him Papa, so she decided to stick with "Hopper" for now— which he was totally okay with), she got to

celebrate them as a family, just like all her friends did.

Christmas was a lot like Thanksgiving, with the Byers coming over to celebrate with them and bringing lots of food, more than El had ever seen together in the same place outside of the television. But she liked Christmas better because she got presents. Books and a new jacket, and a pretty headband for her hair. Will had drawn her a picture of herself as a mage, and told her they'd all explain what that meant when they came over to play D&D soon.

New Year's was a little quieter. Jonathan couldn't come because he was with Nancy somewhere else, but Will and Joyce brought some movies that they all watched together. El's favorite was *Footloose*. She liked the music and the dancing. Hopper fell asleep halfway through it.

Once the holidays were over, though, it was time for the party's big D&D day. Jonathan and Nancy were going on a date later, and Steve was working on his long-procrastinated-on college admissions essays (or so Dustin told them), so Joyce was going to be babysitting for the day. She'd taken the week off to spend some time with her boys before classes resumed, so she had the time.

She drove Will and Mike (who had spent the night at the Byers') up to the cabin not long after Hopper left for work. Dustin and Lucas had biked over to Max's place to pick her up, so they arrived a little bit later. Once they were all there, however, the couch and the coffee table were pushed to the edges of the cramped living area so the group could sit on the floor, in a circle around the board (the coffee table wasn't big enough for them to play on), and the campaign began. Joyce pulled the TV into El's room and stayed there watching some game shows. She kept the door open just in case the kids needed anything, but for the most part she gave them their space.

It took a while for them to explain to El what the characters could do and how the game was played. She could see why they'd chosen a mage for her. Max had chosen a thief type for herself, although she kept calling her character a zoomer, much to the boys' frustration.

Once the game started rolling, El got the hang of the basics fairly quickly. The boys helped her with the XPs and which abilities she

could use, for the most part. She still got a little overwhelmed when she had to decide on an action, and sometimes she wasn't sure which number she was supposed to roll for which thing to happen, but she took her cues from the boys' reactions and managed to navigate her way through without slowing things down *too* much.

Conscious of the time of year and the fact that Joyce didn't like driving on icy streets in the dark, plus the fact that it was El's first time, Mike had come up with a single, fairly straightforward adventure this time around. They came to the end around 5:30 in the afternoon, mostly on a high note... well, except for one.

"Oh, come on, man!" Lucas groaned, hitting his hands against his thighs. "Why'd you gotta do that to me?"

"Oh-*ho*!" Dustin interjected, entirely too gleeful at this turn of events. "He totally pulled a Chewie on you!"

"You *chose* to rescue the princess of the woodland fae," Mike explained, not giving Lucas an inch of leeway. "That means you don't get a medal. Sorry," he dismissed his friend's concern without an ounce of sympathy.

"That is *bullshit*!" Lucas complained again, shaking his head as he stood up abruptly. "We're supposed to be a party! Everybody in the party should get to reap the rewards!"

Will, who was very nearly rolling on the floor with laughter, wiped tears from his eyes as he spoke. "I told you, you should've quit it with the teasing!" he pointed out to Lucas, who just about growled in response. El snuck a glance at Max, who was also laughing so hard her face was almost as red as her hair, and giggled.

"You should've thought of that before you decided you wanted your big hero moment," Mike retorted unflinchingly. He wasn't laughing as much as the others were, but it was clear he was enjoying the moment as well. "I don't make the rules, man."

Lucas shook his head emphatically. "Yes, you do!" he threw back, signaling to Mike's story binder and the character sheets strewn around them. "You're the *freaking* DM!" He groaned again. "*Fine*."

Whatever. You know what?" He pointed at Mike accusingly. "You're just mad because I got my first kiss like half a minute before *you* did!"

He probably should've known by the deafening silence that followed that declaration that it was the wrong thing to say, but it took him a second to realize that. Once he did, he frantically turned toward Max, whose eyebrows were arched high in her forehead and her mouth was open in an affronted gasp. "Wait, I didn't mean it the way it sounded—"

"Really? That's how you're going to play this?" she cut him off, standing up with an indignant huff. "You're just gonna brag about it to all your little nerd friends?"

"Hey," Dustin protested weakly and El sort of got it because— well, she'd been playing D&D with them up until just a few minutes ago; didn't that make *her* a nerd as well? But his interjection went without any backing from the rest, as they were too busy watching Lucas and Max's argument while trying to hold back their laughter.

"I didn't mean it that way," Lucas retorted, trying to sound— what was it that Hopper had called it?— *con-ci-liatory*. "I wasn't bragging, I was just— just stating a fact," he offered his most sincere alternative explanation, and absolutely none of them bought it.

Least of all Max, who rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Well, you can write that *fact* down in the history books, *stalker*, because it's never gonna happen again!" She shouldered her backpack and stomped her way to the exit, barking out an "I'll see you on Friday, El," over her shoulder before walking out and slamming the door behind her.

"No, wait! For real?" Lucas just stood there, shocked for a second at her abrupt exit, as the others finally gave up and started cracking up into laughter. "Max, *come on*!" Finally his feet decided to move, and he hurried to pick up his own bag and follow her before she could get too far.

The rest of them watched everything in amused disbelief. They'd been dating (or "hanging out more than with the others," as Max had put it) for a little under a month, but they'd already broken up like

four times in that period. It wasn't unusual for them to suddenly be on the outs, even if it didn't usually happen in front of all of them.

It certainly had never happened in front of El. "Will they be... okay?" she asked Mike discreetly, a little scared of how things had turned around so quickly. They'd been having so much fun the entire afternoon, but then suddenly...

Mike chuckled and was about to answer her when Dustin groaned loudly. "Shit, now *I'm* gonna have to give her a ride home," he whined as the realization hit him. He sounded so miserable about it that the others couldn't help but laugh even harder.

He rolled his eyes as he got up and started looking for his stuff. "That's me," he began with a sigh, "always helping out other people's girlfriends, never having a girlfriend of my own." He pulled out a 3 Musketeers bar from one of the pockets of his bag, unwrapped it and gave it a big bite, as if nougat was the solution to all his suffering.

Mike shook his head fondly, his cheeks going a little red, but Will grinned at his hat-wearing friend. "Don't worry, Dustin. Someday when being a nerd becomes cool, you'll be fending off the girls by the dozen," he declared, sounding like his words were an absolute certainty. Dustin stared at him with narrowed eyes for a minute.

(He'd told her during one of his visits that after everything that happened, sometimes Will would say things in a way that sounded... oddly prophetic. El had asked what "prophetic" meant and Dustin had launched into an explanation that involved several movies that she had never heard about, so she didn't quite manage to figure out what the word was supposed to mean).

After a few seconds of contemplation, however, Dustin shook his head, as if shaking the thought out. "...Yeah, being a nerd will *never* be cool," he declared, and his friends laughed again. "I gotta go. I'll see you tomorrow," he said, shouldering his bag and walking out the door, starting to yell for Max and Lucas but cutting himself off when he remembered he wasn't supposed to be yelling near the cabin.

Hearing the door open for the third time in a row made Joyce poke her head out of El's room. "Did the others leave? Is the campaign

over?"

"It wasn't a campaign, Mom, it was just an adventure," Will explained as he pushed himself off the floor, drawing an amused "oh, sorry" out of his mother. "Can I go to the bathroom real quick before we go?"

"Sure, sweetie, go ahead," she waved him in the direction of the back of the cabin, where the bathroom was. "I'll be in the car. With how cold it is out here, it might take a few minutes for it to start running." Will nodded and went off.

Joyce turned to the other two kids as she picked up her purse from the dining table and shouldered it. "El, honey, do you need me to move the TV back outside?" El shook her head. She was just planning on going back to her room until Hopper came back from work, anyway. "Okay, then. I left your dinner in the oven, you just have to take it out and serve it when Jim gets here. Make sure you put everything where it was before we got here, okay?" she told them both, though they had already started to pick up all the stuff they used to play, and El would just put the furniture back in place once they left.

She smiled at them. "I'll visit again later this week, alright?" she said, taking a step forward to drop a kiss on the crown of El's head. El gave her a quick hug, always thankful for her warmth and her help. "Mike, don't take too long here, it's getting dark."

He nodded as Joyce walked out as well, and went back to putting all their character sheets and dice and figurines orderly into the box. El watched him as he did so, realizing that this was the first time they'd been alone (well, mostly) for the entire day. And there was something she still didn't understand. "Mike?"

"Yeah?" he replied right away, pausing for a moment to look up at her. He always did that— stopped everything he was doing just to answer her questions or help her out with anything she needed. It made her feel swoopy inside.

She really wanted to know, though, so she asked. "Why not tell them?" she posited, and she saw him frown slightly, which told her he didn't understand what she was asking. So she added, "About the

kissing." It stood out to her that Lucas and the others thought their kiss at the Snow Ball, the one everyone saw, was their first kiss. But it wasn't. It wasn't even their second kiss. Why didn't Mike tell them? Friends don't lie.

She knew the exact moment when Mike understood her question because his cheeks started going red again— she noticed that happened whenever she mentioned kissing. "It's just—" he started, but then he cut himself off, like he often did when he wasn't sure how to explain something. Then he shrugged. "I dunno. It's just... it's none of their business, I guess."

"Like a secret?" she asked again, and she felt something in her stomach do an unpleasant flip when she saw him nod. She remembered what Max had said about secrets. Did that mean he didn't like... the kissing? "Because it's embarrassing?" she asked in a low, unsure voice, almost afraid of his answer, for once.

Mike's head snapped up to her so fast, he didn't seem to notice he'd dropped the figurine he'd been holding. "What? No!" He hurriedly grabbed hold of one of her hands. "No, kissing is good, just..." He looked down momentarily, his lips drawing into a smile, almost like he couldn't hold it back. "Kissing is *really* good," he admitted with a sheepish chuckle, and when he looked straight at her again, there was a brightness in his dark eyes that immediately made Eleven feel better. It could be that she had just misunderstood.

"It's like a secret, yeah, but a good one," Mike continued explaining, this time a little bit surer of his words. "Like... it means *more* because it's just between the two of us. It's special. Kinda like a promise." He smiled softly at her, and she started getting that bubbly feeling in her chest that made her want to kiss him.

"Do you know what I mean?" he asked, always making sure that she really understood what he was trying to say. El thought she got it right this time, and so she nodded. Then she moved a little closer to him, looked into his eyes, and leaned in ever-so-slightly...

"What you mean about what?" came Will's curious voice from the back of the cabin, and Mike and El instinctively jumped apart before he walked over. El had completely forgotten he was still around. "Do

you guys need any help with that?" he offered as he came up to the couch, signaling at the papers and figurines that were still laying around on the floor because they'd gotten distracted.

"Nope. We got it. Thanks," Mike replied quickly, giving up on order and deciding to just grab everything and shove it haphazardly into the box. Eleven handed him the board, which he folded and laid on top of everything else just as Will grabbed his stuff. He gave the two of them a lingering look (not in an uncomfortable way, but just content, though he didn't say why) before reminding Mike to hurry up. Then he made his way out and toward his mother's car.

Mike closed the box and juggled that, some of the leftover snacks and his bag in his arms as El walked him to the door. "Okay, so, I'll stop by on Saturday, yeah?"

She nodded, although she was sure they'd still talk before then—Hopper had given her a walkie-talkie for Christmas and she used it to call Mike on the days he couldn't visit. She only had to expand the range a little with her powers, so it was easy.

Giving her a smile goodbye, he turned to walk out the door, but El lightly tugged him back toward her by the sleeve of his sweater. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

Making sure they were obscured by the door in case Will was still nearby, she stood up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his, softly. Even though the door was partially open and the chilly air was creeping into the cabin, kissing Mike always made her feel warm.

She pulled back, lips still tingling, and smiled. "Kinda like a promise," she repeated, feeling light and airy.

"Promise," he breathed out, grinning back at her— he looked almost as happy as she felt, and she loved it.

Then he remembered that the others were waiting for him, so he quickly gave her a kiss on the cheek and walked backwards out of the cabin, like he didn't want to stop looking at her. She gave him a small

wave and he returned it awkwardly— because his hands were still full— just barely managing not to trip on the porch step, much to El's amusement.

She closed the door behind her once he was out of sight, and leaned against it, smiling so hard her cheeks hurt. She finally got to spend an entire evening having fun with her friends, like all the other normal kids did, and she even got to have a moment alone with Mike by the end. She couldn't wait to tell Hop all about their D&D adventure when he came home.

It was the best day ever.

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Notes: So, it's November already, so that's basically Christmas, right?

It usually doesn't take me 3K words to get to the intended "quiet moment" between Mike and Eleven, but I did my research on D&D for this one, so gosh dang it, I'm gonna use it! To wit: Always play D&D on a tabletop (the boys only made an exception for El this time); an adventure is a single storyline while a campaign is like a much longer series of linear and/or parallel adventures; and I really, really wanted Max to be a rogue type, because they're apparently really good at picking locks, but it turns out that the rogue was only made a main character type in 1989. So boo to that. A thief is the closest I could find.

Fun fact: Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve fell on Mondays in 1984, so I decided to be magnanimous and give the kids two weeks off, just because I can.

Also, a quick plug: I have a vlog, and I talk a lot about *Stranger Things* on my vlog because... well, duh. Anyway, last Friday I uploaded a review of *Stranger Things 2* which is full of me blubbering about Mike and Eleven and Hopper and all my babies, so if you're into that kind of stuff or want to laugh at my ridiculousness for a bit, look me up on Youtube under FreakingNarnia dot com. I also crosspost the videos to

my Tumblr, if that's easier for you. My handle is girls-are-weird.